



# U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

## Oman

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Basic Law provides for the freedom to practice religious rites, in accordance with tradition, if the practices do not breach public order, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, there are some de facto limitations on proselytizing and printing religious material. The Basic Law declares that Islam is the state religion and that Shari'a is the source of all legislation.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. However, over the course of several months beginning in December 2004, several dozen Ibadhi Muslims were arrested and charged with belonging to an illegal organization and seeking to overthrow the Government to establish an Ibadhi religious state. Although most were formally convicted in May of possessing illegal weapons and sentenced to terms of 1 to 20 years, the Sultan issued each of them a complete pardon on June 9. Non-Muslim religious worship is permitted, and Sultan Qaboos Al Sa'id, the monarch of the country, has given land for the construction of Hindu and Christian centers of worship.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 119,498 square miles, and its population is 2.33 million, of whom 1.8 million are citizens, according to the 2003 national census. While no official statistics are kept on religious affiliation, most citizens are Ibadhi or Sunni Muslims. The Government does not give official preference to any particular religious group. Statistical data on the religious affiliation of the population is not collected nor publicized. There also is a small but significant population of Shi'a Muslims concentrated in the capital area and along the country's Batinah coast. Ibadhism, a form of Islam distinct from Shi'ism and the "Orthodox" schools of Sunnism, became the dominant religious sect in the country by the eighth century A.D. Known for its moderate conservatism, Oman is the only country in the Islamic world to have had a majority Ibadhi population. One distinguishing feature of Ibadhism is the choice of ruler, known as the Imam, by communal consensus. Additionally, there is a small community of ethnically Indian Hindu citizens and reportedly a very small number of Christian citizens who came from India or the Levant and who have been naturalized.

The majority of non-Muslims are noncitizen immigrant workers from South Asia. There are a number of Christian denominations represented.

While there is no information regarding missionary groups in the country, several faith-based organizations operate. Clergy of the Anglican Church, the Reformed Church of America, and other Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox groups are present.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Basic Law provides for the freedom to practice religious rites, in accordance with tradition, if the practices do not breach public order, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there are some restrictions. The Basic Law declares that Islam is the state religion and that Shari'a is the source of all legislation. Within these parameters, the Government permits freedom of worship for non-Muslims. The Basic Law prohibits discrimination against individuals on the basis of religion or religious group. Some non-Muslims worship at churches and temples built on land donated by the Sultan, including two Catholic, two Protestant, and two Hindu complexes. Adherents of other religious faiths, typically found among expatriate residents, practice their rites in less formal facilities, such as at company labor compounds.

All religious organizations must be registered with the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, and the Government restricts some of their activities. The criterion for registration is opaque. Religious groups seeking registration must submit an application to the Ministry. The Ministry investigates the number of affiliates and area of concentration and once approved, the Ministry issues a written letter to the group allowing them to engage in religious activity or to establish a place of worship.

In late 2004 and 2005, the Government arrested dozens of Ibadhi Muslim citizens and brought several charges against them, including belonging to an illegal religious organization. One non-Muslim religious organization present in the country for several decades has had its application for formal registration pending at the Ministry for several years. Anecdotal evidence suggests that visiting non-Muslim organizations are permitted to operate within legal boundaries if a registered entity agrees to sponsor them with the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

The Government has sponsored forums at which differing interpretations of Islam have been examined, and government-sponsored interfaith dialogue took place on a regular basis. During the reporting period, the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs hosted several Christian and Muslim scholars and lecturers of various schools of thought to discuss interfaith relations and tolerance in Islamic traditions. In April, the Sultanate sent a delegation to the 17th International Conference for the Higher Council of Islamic Affairs in Jordan. Also in April, the minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs participated in a forum in Qatar on U.S.-Islamic dialogue.

The following Islamic holy days are considered national holidays: Eid al Adha, Islamic (Hijra) New Year, the Birth of the Prophet, Ascension Day, and Eid al Fitr.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

Citizens and noncitizen residents are free to discuss their religious beliefs within the limits of the law; however, the Government prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing Muslims. The Basic Law does not specifically prohibit proselytizing, nor does any other law; however, in practice the Government uses immigration regulations and laws concerning morals to restrict individuals suspected of engaging in proselytizing.

Under Islamic law, a Muslim who recants belief in Islam is considered an apostate and dealt with under applicable Islamic legal procedure. During the reporting period, there were no cases of persons punished for conversion, and the Government asserts that it has no legal authority to prosecute persons for changing their religious beliefs. Proselytizing non-Muslims by Muslims is allowed. The Government records religious affiliation on national identity cards for citizens, and on residency cards for noncitizens. Religious affiliation was previously recorded on passports; however, they no longer contain this information. Statistics on religious affiliation are not published.

The Government prohibits non-Muslim groups from publishing religious material, although non-Muslim religious material printed abroad may be imported. Members of all religions and religious groups are free to maintain links with co-religionists abroad and to undertake foreign travel for religious purposes. Clergy from abroad are permitted to visit to carry out duties related to registered religious organizations.

The Government expects all imams to preach sermons within the parameters of standardized texts distributed monthly by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. The Government monitors sermons at mosques to ensure that the imams do not discuss political topics and stay within the state-approved orthodoxy of Islam. The Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs maintains a web site and toll-free number whereby questions on issues of the practice of faith and worship can be answered by the Grand Mufti or his representatives. The Grand Mufti regularly appears on television and radio to answer questions from the public.

Some aspects of Islamic law and tradition as practiced in the country discriminate against women. Shari'a favors male heirs in adjudicating inheritance claims. While there is continuing reluctance to take an inheritance dispute to court for fear of alienating the family, women increasingly are aware of and taking steps to protect and exercise their rights as citizens. When Oman acceded in April 2005 to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), it attached reservations on any provision within the Convention deemed to be not in accordance with Islamic law.

Citizen children must attend schools that provide instruction in Islam; noncitizen children may attend schools that do not offer instruction in Islam. Instruction in Islam is a component of the basic curriculum in all public school grades K-12. The curriculum focuses on the Qur'an and Hadith, the life of the Prophet Muhammed and his companions, and the five pillars of the Islamic faith. The curriculum primarily reflects the Ibadhi school of Islamic thought, although schools reportedly made allowances in certain regions where other interpretations of Islam predominate.

Military bases maintain at least one mosque and one imam for the convenience of military personnel. Moreover, training facilities dedicate about three sessions per week for the study of Islamic issues. Non-Muslim members in the military are not prevented from practicing their religion or compelled to undertake mandatory Islamic studies; however, if they wish to worship they must seek places to do so on their own.

#### *Abuses of Religious Freedom*

During the reporting period, approximately 50 persons were arrested, detained, and suspended from their employment on suspicion of belonging to an illegal organization, and of conspiring to overthrow the Government to resurrect an Ibadhi religious

state. The Government claims the accused had weapons and violent intent, although some of the accused admitted only to belonging to an organization devoted to propagating Ibadhi religious values. However, on June 9, just 30 days after their convictions, Sultan Qaboos issued a pardon of the 31 arrestees who stood trial. The Government announced that the pardoned individuals were also free to resume their previous employment.

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### *Abuses by Terrorist Organizations*

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the reporting period.

### **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Religious discrimination in the private sector is largely absent. Christian theologians have met with local Islamic authorities and with members of the faculty at the country's major university. Private groups that promote interfaith dialogue are permitted to exist as long as discussions do not constitute an attempt to cause Muslims to recant their Islamic beliefs. Societal attitudes toward proselytizing and conversion generally are negative.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. This included inquiries into the arrests of the alleged Ibadhi conservatives during the reporting period. Representative of the U.S. Embassy freely participated in local religious ceremonies and have contact with members of non-Muslim religious groups. During the reporting period, the Embassy sponsored the visit of a U.S. research specialist in the field of Islamic studies, who addressed audiences (including at the Sultan's Grand Mosque) on prophecy among the Arabs. In June 2005, the Embassy sponsored an interfaith Ramadan event with an American theologian speaking on Ramadan in America. The Embassy helped to organize a program in the United States on interfaith dialogue for the visiting Omani Minister of Awqaf and Religious Affairs.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51607.htm)